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ABSTRACT

Interpretive inquiry is a technique for open discussion in literature classes. The theoretical foundation for this technique is derived from cognitive psychology's finding that the success of a teaching-learning exchange depends on what the learner already knows about the subject and on the ability of the teacher to present the material for the learner to recognize and reprocess. In interpretive inquiry the students face one another, the teacher invites all comments with an attitude of acceptance, and the group is small and heterogenous. Questions should be stated as simply as possible and should be such that no right or wrong answers are expected but rather are those for which various interpretations can be supported with textual evidence; this develops higher-level knowledge including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Most important of the questions is the "lead off" question, which should be prepared in advance along with a few follow-up questions; most later questions will arise spontaneously. (DF)

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FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE:

INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

From my students I have learned something important about lecturing on theories: if I am in <u>great</u> form, I can maintain their attention for, maybe, ten minutes. After that, they slump, their eyes retreat inward, they hear heels clicking in the hall, their breathing becomes uniformly regular. And so more and more, I am teaching composition by having students <u>do</u>. I am teaching literature as I've always taught it—having them participate in open discussion. Occasionally I add information, but most of the time I function as a discussion leader. As I've refined discussion-leading techniques throughout the years, I've discovered that the intuitions of the people who educated my intuitions have some sound bases in theory, especially in the generalizations that issue from the group of researchers known collectively as cognitive psychologists.

I do believe that the cognitivists would have me avoid lecturing, possibly even about cognitive theories. I don't know whether they avoid lecturing to their own students—in some situations, perhaps they would agree to lecture as a way of transferring information. However, if they are implementing their own theories, they would surely attempt to insure that the lecture information corresponds in vital ways to information and concepts that form the structures of intellect of their listeners. I assume that this correspondence applies here today—that most of you have within

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you the meanings for some terms and the understanding for some concepts that I will be using as simply and as expeditiously as possible.

I will be outlining some major aspects of cognitive psychology as a theoretical justification for the use of a particular format for open discussion in literature classes, a format that will be elaborated. I will conclude by mentioning 6 entirely different goals in the teaching of literature, most of which are served best in varying degrees by discussion. To help you follow major concepts in this paper, I have prepared two handouts, one with some pertinent quotes from Piaget, Bruner, Vygotsky, and Neisser, psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists, the other listing some characteristics of the discussion technique I am calling "interpretive inquiry."

According to Benjamin Bloom, cognition "includes activities such as remembering, reasoning, problem solving, concept formation, and, to a limited extent, creative thinking." Thus, the theorists who have studied these aspects of the way the mind works—the cognitivists—can tell us much about the ways our students are likely to be processing or acting upon the information we expect them to master in our classes. To ignore this relatively new and genuinely vigorous kind of understanding is to be more casual about the effects of our teaching than we ought to be.

According to a description by Morris Bigge of several theories of learning, cognitive theories focus on three main aspects of learning: "the activity of the mind in learning," "the importance of interaction as a source of learning," and "strategies in learning that produce insight." The three key words are "activity," "interaction," and "insight."

All cognitive psychologists agree that the mind must actively manipulate information before that information is likely to become part of the permanent structures of the mind called long-term memory. Piaget describes this process in dialectical terms: information impinging on the mind must be rendered in some familiar and acceptable form in order for the mind to accept it, and then, in accepting it, the mind changes or accomodates to it. Piaget's terms are "assimilation" and "accomodation." The process of learning is a dialectical one: when new information is assimilated, the mind is changed and accomodates to it and can now assimilate new information, and so the dialectical process in the deep structures of the mind continues. The process is one of constant activity, the mind not passively accepting incoming information but actively tailoring it to fit the existing structure.

If you cannot paraphrase what I am saying, creating an understanding that suits you, this information is not likely to be assimilated in the deep structures of the mind, and you are not likely to remember it. What determines the success of this exchange is (1) what you already know about it and (2) my ability to say it in such a way that you can recognize or reprocess it for yourself.

Jerome Bruner describes the process in different terms, terms of categories or classifications that already exist in the mind. Thus perceptive and cognitive structures act upon incoming information to fit it into existing categories of the mind. Special difficulties in learning result when the incoming information meets no existing categories or else when it meets categories that are incongruent with the new information: then learning becomes especially difficult because the manipulation of the incoming information must be strenuous indeed. Bruner and Neisser emphasize

the importance of the activities of analysis and synthesis, both of which can be painful and tiring—and also exhilarating—as I'm sure we all know.

The most likely way for information to be transferred successfully, according to these cognitive psychologists, is through interaction. Most of that interaction is verbal, the encoding and decoding of ideas. Through the act of verbalization, Vygotsky says, we create the reality of thought. Furthermore, if people together exchange thoughts, they can constantly refine and clarify their meanings—all the while acting to tailor those thoughts to fit individual structures. Meanwhile, they are developing these important skills: first, fluency and verbalization, and second, the ability to compare, adjust, and select options—and refine and clarify. Thus the product of the interaction becomes a version of truth that is most real and honest to each individual.

Insight is most often the result of our own synthesizing or collating of ideas in such a manner that we discover something—Eureka! Insight, never the result of direct transfer of a generalization but always the discovery of it, often comes as a joy that is preceded by strenous mental activity. When a runner or jogger exerts herself and successfully completes a challening goal she has established for herself, she feels tired but elated by the exertion and the success. If the thinker's goal is the understanding and creativity of thinking, and if she exerts all her mental muscles and succeeds in putting it all together successfully, she too is elated by the exertion and success. The success of discovery, the moment of insight, is the Eureka! response.

The Interpretive Inquiry Discussion Technique

Experts in discussion-leading techniques make some suggestions that we as teachers of literature should follow, suggestions that I will incor-

porate in my description of the discussion process I am calling "interpretive inquiry." The experts say that students should face each other, the teacher should invite all comments with an attitude of acceptance (not one of seeking and rewarding some pre-determined answers), and the group should, if possible, be small and heterogeneous. Questions, which should always be stated as simply as possible, should be those to which there are no right and wrong answers but rather those for which various interpretations can be supported with evidence from the text. As students seek within themselves honest responses, they can honestly dispute interpretations, and they can turn to the book—which should be in their hands and available—for support.

By the way, to interrupt this description of technique with some theory that you may recognize, the lowest level of thinking in the Cognitive Taxonomy of Educational Objectives edited by Benjamin Bloom is the level of knowledge or information to be memorized. This is the level established by questions to which right and wrong answers are appropriate. The higher levels, including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, are those about which honest dispute can arise. It is those higher levels from which our questions should be framed. Furthermore, in considering the Taxonomy, the lower level of knowledge is subsumed in the higher levels; knowledge is also actively manipulated in the minds of the thinking students as they seek support for their answers on the synthesis or analysis level.

To return to our description of suggested techniques in leading discussion, the most important question is the lead-off question, the answer to which all other answers should in some way develop or elaborate. The teacher should write this first question as well as some follow-ups that she can use if necessary. Most later questions, however, should arise spontaneously from the answers that students give as the discussion proceeds.

Often students will supply their own questions, especially if the atmosphere is a relaxed one wherein students can recognize that their interpretations and insights are accepted contingent upon their textual support in case of possible dispute.

This relaxed atmosphere is essential to this kind of discussion, and it is most likely to be deveopled and maintained if the teacher has an open-minded attitude and asks questions to which she really would like to hear several different valid answers. If she knows scholarship on the text, she will be able to recognize aspects of it that are controversial. Further, she should ask questions that interest her and that should lead to vigorous discussion as discussants clarify their thinking and support it with more and more convincing evidence. Feedback from the discussion leader must always be encouragement and acceptance; feedback from students will usually promote dispute. Even new evidence from the teacher that can promote dispute must not be given in a negative or discouraging way.

I insist that all members of the class participate. There are always some class leaders who will speak out enthusiastically, but by calling on others more reticent, these people usually understand that they cannot monopolize the hour. If I discern pain and embarrassment, I do not press a student hard for an answer. All students know that they are free to say "I don't know." They also know that long pauses for thinking are not unusual.

Research has shown that throughout public school years, two main reasons account for students' fears about speaking out in class: they are afraid that they cannot say what they mean, that they cannot frame their ideas clearly, and in addition, they are afraid of being wrong. To direct a lively

discussion is to eliminate as much as possible the bases for these two fears by eliminating the reasons for anxiety.

In addition to the skill of asking good interpretive questions and the demand of accepting, open-minded attention to students' answers, a good discussion leader must conduct the discussion with sensitivity to the orchestration, the orchestration of a non-existing and ever-changing score. She is constantly making decisions: Should she maintain or change or defer a given line of thinking? Pick up one point or another for comment or elaboration? Allow the silence to continue or break it? Direct attention to a tangential idea? Provide new information? Summarize? Restate? Skill in making these executive decisions develops with practice, but with genuine openness and respect for students' answers, even inexperienced leaders can enjoy much success. When students respond with moments of insight—moments that they often share overtly—then teachers know that the stimulation is providing a creative thinking experience.

Classroom time is not utilized as a rehearsal for remembered thinking. Shared thoughts cannot be structured in advance of the moment. This kind of class is designed to take advantage of the unique situation of the classroom wherein a group of contemporaries who have read the same material encounter one another and share reflections about that material. This genuine interaction, then, clarifies and deepens and extends the thinking process. It promotes the processes of cognition described by cognitivists.

This kind of discussion differs significantly from two more commonly types of discussion groups in the classroom. Unlike the recitation, where students are usually expected to repeat the correct answer they have learned in advance of the class, the interpretative inquiry class asks for spon-

taneously developed answers, preferrably in tentative form so that they can change easily without the usual damage to the speaker's ego. It is also different from the debate class during which students aim to change the opinion of those who disagree with them. When all people search together for answers, the tension in the polemical situation is reduced by the cooperation demanded by a common search.

One major distinction between this kind of class and the lecture class is that, when students leave the classroom, they have few if any notes to study and memorize. Rather, they go back to their rooms and reread the text and reflect upon it. We can provide their motivation—a paper due next week. Students should not leave this kind of classroom undisturbed. The shared thinking in the classroom and the later solitary thinking all together should provide a wide range of opportunities for individual minds to utilize the text as a seminal challenge to their usual narrow modes of thinking.

I have described this discussion class in idealized terms. Sometimes there are great moments of insight, of excitement, of heavy and intense collective thinking. Sometimes there are moments of restlessness, especially from students who want only to be told what they should think, those who become frustrated and angry when urged to think for themselves. I've led discussions of difficult works like Heart of Darkness when I've had to interpolate more explanation than I like to do. I've stated some implausible interpretations to which I expect response. I've shown pictures of the Congo at the turn of the century and told them about Conrad's life. I've even "pre-read" the novel for them when I've conjectured about a cognitive imbalance between the work and their intellectual capabilities. And still,

these adjustments have failed to produce great moments or at least great moments for most of the students. But when I compare the lack of insight generated in these classes with the lack of insight generated in most lecture classes, I am satisfied. The ideal is sometimes possible, and the reduction of it is still better than never.

It works particularly well with literature. Let us think about what we want our students to gain as a result of their study of literature. The most likely goals for the study of literature, I think, are as follows. First, according to the Dartmouth Conference in 1967, students should find pleasure and a desire to read more good literature when they leave our classrooms. Second, Louise Rosenblatt and Walter Slatoff stress the importance of the experience of the literature, of the participation in activities and lives that otherwise they would never know about. Third, most of us want our students to learn skills, skills of reading and verbalizing, and thinking and listening—especially the skills of reading various genres of literature that we truly love. Fourth, many literary critics and educators see the main function of the study of literature as providing a way of understanding oneself, one's life and values. Literature can provide a perspective that, by providing a lookinglass—even a cracked one, permits us to see ourselves and expand our moral consciousness. Fifth, many of us hope that our students will develop some taste, some standards by which to evaluate and select the best that has been thought and written in our heritage. And last and perhaps most widespread, we hope that students learn information about their heritage so that they can share in the expanded frame of reference of most educated people in the western world.

Interpretive inquiry as a classroom procedure provides a better way to effect more of these goals than any other classroom procedure. Furthermore,

it provides a way for students (and teachers, too) to manipulate information, interact with each other, and develop insight into a text whereby their thinking is challenged by the text to rise above it. By studying the text, they learn about it, about themselves, and about their world.

Theory and abstraction must indeed illuminate our daily rounds of nitty-gritty work. And our work must contribute to our understanding of theory and abstraction.